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Lifelong learning in Sustainable Development Goal 4: What does it mean for UNESCO's rights-based approach to adult learning and education?

Maren Elfert¹

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Abstract

This article, which draws on a review of primary and secondary literature, examines the role of a human rights-based approach to adult learning and education (ALE) in the context of the global Education 2030 agenda, which is aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) launched in 2015 by the United Nations. Whereas the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) focused on primary education, the SDGs, through SDG 4 which is devoted to education, call on Member States to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”. The inclusion of lifelong learning has awakened hopes for a stronger role of ALE in global education agendas and policies. In principle, the ten targets of SDG 4 open up clear possibilities for ALE. However, the author cautions that there is cause for scepticism that ALE, in particular human rights-based ALE, will receive more attention under the SDGs than it did under the MDGs. The article is structured into three sections. The first section traces the emergence of a rights-based approach to adult education as an international paradigm, with particular attention given to the role of UNESCO. The second section discusses how the rights-based approach to adult education has been contested by other actors in the field of education for development. In the final section, the author draws on recent empirical data to reflect on the role of ALE in the age of the SDGs.

Keywords lifelong learning · adult learning and education (ALE) · Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) · education as a human right · UNESCO · literacy

Résumé

Apprentissage tout au long de la vie dans l'Objectif 4 de développement durable : quelle importance pour l'approche de l'apprentissage et de l'éducation des adultes fondée sur les droits que préconise l'UNESCO ? – Cet article s'appuie sur une ana-

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lyse de la documentation scientifique primaire et secondaire pour examiner le rôle d'une approche de l'apprentissage et de l'éducation des adultes (AEA) fondée sur les droits fondamentaux, dans le contexte de l'agenda mondial Éducation 2030 rattaché aux Objectifs de développement durable (ODD) énoncés en 2015 par les Nations Unies. Alors que les Objectifs du millénaire pour le développement (OMD) étaient axés sur l'enseignement primaire, les ODD, à travers l'Objectif 4 consacré à l'éducation, appellent les États membres à « assurer l'accès de tous à une éducation de qualité, sur un pied d'égalité, et (à) promouvoir les possibilités d'apprentissage tout au long de la vie ». L'inclusion de l'apprentissage tout au long de la vie fait naître l'espoir d'un rôle renforcé de l'AEA dans les politiques et programmes mondiaux en matière d'éducation. En principe, les dix cibles de l'Objectif 4 ouvrent des possibilités explicites pour l'AEA. Mais l'auteure invite à être sceptique quant au fait que les ODD accorderont une plus grande importance que les OMD à l'AEA, en particulier à l'approche fondée sur les droits fondamentaux. L'article est structuré en trois sections. La première retrace l'émergence en tant que modèle mondial d'une approche de l'éducation des adultes fondée sur les droits, et met l'accent sur le rôle de l'UNESCO. La seconde section analyse comment l'approche de l'éducation des adultes fondée sur les droits est contestée par d'autres acteurs dans le domaine de l'éducation pour le développement. Dans la dernière section, l'auteure s'appuie sur les données empiriques récentes pour explorer le rôle de l'apprentissage et de l'éducation des adultes à l'heure des Objectifs de développement durable.

Introduction

This article examines the role of a human rights-based approach to adult learning and education (ALE) in the context of the global Education 2030 agenda, which is aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The agenda was launched in 2015 under the title *Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (UN 2015). Given the strong historical connection between lifelong learning and adult education, the call within SDG 4 to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” has awakened hope among many for a stronger role of ALE in global education agendas and policies. As Aaron Benavot (2018, p. 5) observes, this is the first time that lifelong learning has been articulated as a development priority, and therefore represents a historic opportunity to raise the profile of ALE. The prominence of lifelong learning is particularly notable, as the previous development frameworks paid little attention to it (Torres 2002). The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which preceded the SDGs, focused on primary education, and the Education for All agenda (1990–2015) emphasised basic education, effectively prioritising universal primary education (Power 2015, p. 48; McGrath 2018, p. 50). In principle, the ten targets of SDG 4 open up clear possibilities for ALE (*Incheon Declaration*, WEF 2015). However, I will argue that there is cause for scepticism that ALE, and in particular human rights-based ALE, will receive more attention under the SDGs.

The question guiding this article is: *What does the prominence of lifelong learning in SDG 4 mean for the human rights-based approach to ALE?* I will approach the question by looking back at the history of adult education from the perspective of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which, since its inception in 1945, has been instrumental in expanding the right to education to include adult and lifelong learning and education. The article draws on a review of primary and secondary literature and is structured into three sections. The first section traces the emergence of the rights-based approach to adult education as an international paradigm, with particular attention given to the role of UNESCO. The second section discusses how the rights-based approach to adult education has been contested by other actors in the field of education for development. In the final section of the article, I draw on recent empirical data on ALE to reflect on the future of ALE in the age of the SDGs.

UNESCO and the right to (adult) education and lifelong learning

The right to education was enshrined in UNESCO's constitution within the formulation "education for all" (UNESCO 2018 [1945], p. 5). Three years later, in 1948, it was included in article 26 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UN 1948). Article 26 formed part of "social, economic and cultural rights", which were newer, less recognised and more contested than civil and political rights (Morsink 2000). Adult education appears in Article 26 in the references to "education ... in the fundamental stages" and "technical and professional education". In the wake of the devastation and dehumanisation wrought by the Second World War, debates on social and economic rights, including the right to education, in the United Nations and UNESCO focused on the idea of human dignity, personal fulfilment and the role of education for international understanding and peace (Elfert 2018, chapter 3). Adult education, in particular, was strongly linked to democracy.

One of the aims of adult education, as formulated at the First International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA I) convened by UNESCO in 1949, was "to foster the true spirit of democracy and the true spirit of humanity" (UNESCO 1949a). In the following decades, the right to education was further defined in a series of international human rights treaties, such as the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* of 1966 (UN 1976, article 13; it entered into force in 1976). UNESCO has played an instrumental role in expanding the right to education to include adults and in promoting a humanistic and emancipatory approach to adult education (Elfert 2015a, 2018), for example through the *Nairobi Recommendation on the Development of Adult Learning and Education* of 1976 (UNESCO 1976) – renewed in 2015 as the *Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education* (UNESCO 2015a), the series of International Conferences on Adult Education (CONFINTEA), held every 12–13 years since 1949, and through its pioneering work on the conceptualisation of lifelong learning. UNESCO's vision of lifelong learning as a guiding principle of a democratic learning society is infused by a humanistic philosophy.

As I have argued elsewhere (Elfert 2015a, 2018), the egalitarian and democratic spirit inherent in the idea of education as a human right reached its fullest expression in UNESCO's work on the concept of lifelong learning, represented by two publications, namely *Learning to be* (often referred to as the *Faure Report*) (Faure et al. 1972) and *Learning: The Treasure Within* (also known as the *Delors Report*) (Delors et al. 1996). The *Faure Report* was influenced by the thinking of popular and critical adult educators, such as Paulo Freire, author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire 1970), for whom the ultimate aim of adult education was liberation and “conscientization” of the working class (Finger and Asún 2001).

However, UNESCO's utopian and citizenship-oriented vision of lifelong learning has largely been supplanted by more economics-driven proposals for education put forward by other international organisations (Rubenson 2006). Although the World Bank and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have promoted adult education periodically, these organisations are guided by a human capital approach to education and do not fully endorse education as a human right. Since the 1980s, under the influence of neoliberalism, many social and economic rights have been rolled back (MacNaughton and Frey 2018). The drive to privatise and commodify education has largely reduced ALE to the acquisition of skills for the job market (Allais 2012; Bowl 2017). In many countries, ALE policy is limited to skills development strategies (DoHET 2015; Elfert and Rubenson 2013). Although lifelong learning remains ubiquitous in policy discourse, in particular in the Western world, its meaning has been adapted to the dominant neoliberal ideology. In most contemporary education policies, adult learning and education are essentially regarded as the responsibility of the individual to acquire (Bagnall 2000).

Conflicting agendas and pressures on adult education and lifelong learning: a short historical review

Ever since UNESCO was founded in 1945, the organisation has made adult education a priority. In the immediate aftermath of World War II, there were many children and adults who had missed out on years of schooling and education. The reconstruction of societies and the ensuing economic boom called for the fast reintegration of war survivors into the economy. But adult education was also seen as vital to building new democratic societies after the devastating experience of totalitarianism. UNESCO regarded adult education as a necessary instrument to “re-educate” the youth that had been indoctrinated by totalitarian governments (UNESCO 1947, p. 6); it also responded to the spirit of renewal felt by the survivors of the war. In UNESCO's early days, the citizenship dimension of adult education prevailed over the economic dimension, which became more influential from the 1960s onwards. Adult education, and education in general, represented a notion of unity, and adult educators often invoked the concept of “solidarity” (UNESCO 1949a) and “brotherhood” (Jessup 1953).

In 1949, when UNESCO convened CONFINTEA I in Elsinore, Denmark, Director-General Jaime Torres Bodet opened the conference by declaring adult education to be “one of the most important questions of our day and one likely to

have the most far-reaching consequences” (UNESCO 1949b, p. 7). The delegates endorsed the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UNESCO 1949a, p. 30), and defined adult education as

more than anything a spiritual condition, a thirst for knowledge, a desire for mental and social freedom, an urge to participate in cultural development (UNESCO 1949b, p. 7).

Johannes Novrup, the Chairperson of CONFINTEA I, viewed adult education as a “radical, almost revolutionary educational idea” (quoted in Jessup 1953, p. 17).

UNESCO’s first educational flagship programme, termed *Fundamental education*, while also encompassing schooling for children, reflected the organisation’s strong interest in adult and community-based education. Literacy campaigns constituted an integral component of fundamental education (UNESCO 1949c, pp. 33–37). In the second half of the 1950s, fundamental education came under attack by some Member States who criticised it as colonial and called for greater attention to the development of school systems in developing countries. This criticism was certainly justified. UNESCO’s first Director-General Julian Huxley and others perceived fundamental education as a sort of imperialist crusade against ignorance, in which Western education would bring a scientific worldview to those who lived in “darkness” (Huxley 1946 p. 17). However, the colonial nature of the programme was not the only reason for its demise. Adult education became a contested strategy as new actors with new priorities emerged in the system of global education governance.

In the context of decolonisation and the Cold War, when education emerged as a key pillar of international development, the fundamental education programme got entangled in power struggles between UNESCO and other United Nations (UN) bodies (Jones 1988, pp. 90–92). Increasing pressure to focus UNESCO’s work on formal education constituted another challenge to the fundamental education programme. The report of a meeting of UNESCO’s Fundamental education staff to discuss these challenges addressed the “competition ... between fundamental education and the formal education system” (UNESCO 1956, p. 6). The report states:

In one camp are those who contend that there is no substitute for a system of universal and compulsory primary schooling as a means of achieving widespread literacy ... In the other camp are those whose purpose it is to raise the living standards of the present generation ... and who believe that the adult population must be mobilized (ibid.).

This passage reveals the tension between the advocates of formal education and those who wanted to see a stronger role for adult and non-formal education. The demise of the Fundamental education programme marked the emergence of the “literacy versus schools” dichotomy which runs like a thread through the history of UNESCO and education for development.

In this regard, it is important to take a closer look at what happened to literacy, which represented a major pillar of adult education at the time. In the 1960s, many newly independent Asian and African countries, which used UNESCO

and the United Nations as platforms for their political claims, advocated for literacy campaigns. From the beginning, UNESCO had pursued a universal literacy campaign, which René Maheu, UNESCO's Director-General from 1962–1974, considered worthy of the Nobel peace prize (Jones and Coleman 2005, p. 202). A proposal for the realisation of such a campaign to the UN General Assembly came to nothing, to a large extent due to the United States' resistance and preference to focus on the expansion of formal school education and technical education. Maheu had no choice but mobilise support for a "kind of consolation measure" (Jones 1988, p. 142), the Experimental World Literacy Programme (EWLP), based on a "functional literacy" approach.

Arthur Gillette maintained that literacy campaigns were not pursued because of the "then-ascendant influence of education-qua-investment economists, for whom literacy work should be focused selectively on the actual or potential producers of a given society" (Gillette 1987, p. 200). UNESCO's literacy approach had fallen into discredit among the funders of EWLP, in particular the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), as expressed in an April 1968 memorandum by Duncan Ballantine, the World Bank's education director, in which he described the Bank's approach to literacy as "instrumental rather than as an end objective, which it is still to a large extent in the Unesco approach" (quoted in Jones 1992, p. 97; see also Dorn and Ghodsee 2012, p. 375). What Ballantine meant was that UNESCO, in line with its human rights approach to education, pursued a literacy strategy that involved raising the literacy levels of the entire population, including marginalised groups, whereas the World Bank focused on raising only the literacy levels of those parts of the population it considered "instrumental" for economic development. When it was time to evaluate the EWLP, the UNDP and the World Bank considered its results disappointing as, in their view, the programme could not demonstrate a link between rising literacy levels and economic growth (Jones 1992, pp. 98–99).

Charles Dorn and Kristen Ghodsee ascribe the demise of the fundamental education programme and universal literacy to the politicisation of literacy in the context of the Cold War. A United States report on UNESCO identified the goals of fundamental education as "contrary to American ideals and traditions" (Dorn and Ghodsee 2012, p. 375). UNESCO also lost influence as the lead agency of the United Nations system with responsibility for education because it was suspected by some of being sympathetic to communism:

Because of its emphasis on promoting a capitalist path to economic development, the [World] Bank ... agreed to extend loans to educational endeavors as long as these endeavors could be shown to support the promotion of free markets. Because literacy had become ideologically linked with political rather than economic goals, it fell outside of the bank's self-defined agenda to promote redistribution with growth (Dorn and Ghodsee 2012, p. 398).

It was in this context that the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) withdrew its funding to literacy programmes as part of President Kennedy's "Alliance for Progress" initiative in Brazil in 1964, around the same time that René Maheu was forced to abandon the idea of a universal literacy campaign. When,

in the state of Rio Grande do Norte, a group of workers who had participated in Paulo Freire's literacy programme went on strike, an article in the daily newspaper *Jornal do Brasil* warned of the liberation of social forces that would be difficult to control (Kirkendall 2010, p. 41).

Literacy's fall from favour was part of a global shift in the approach to adult education for development in the 1960s and 1970s, in which a rationalistic-technocratic and economistic approach to education was dominant. A new group of educational planners and experts "thought of planning as a technical professional activity divorced from politics" (Benveniste 2007, p. 7). It is no surprise that UNESCO's work to promote the concept of lifelong learning (in the 1960s and 1970s, the common concept used was "lifelong education") and its rather high-flown idealistic report on lifelong education, *Learning to be* (the *Faure Report*), published in 1972, largely fell on deaf ears in developing countries (Elfert 2018, chapter 5). The newly emerging organisations in the field of education for development saw adult education more as an investment in a market-oriented capitalist economy than as a way to help human beings develop their potential and become active citizens of a democratic society, let alone to transform society as advocated by Paulo Freire and the *Faure Report*.

UNESCO's humanistic vision of ALE and lifelong learning experienced something of a revival in the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Several events, including the International Literacy Year in 1990, the launch of UNESCO's report *Learning: A Treasure Within* (the *Delors Report*) in 1996, and a series of optimistic international summits such as CONFITEA V in 1997 built momentum for a human rights-based approach to education. However, this reversal of fortune was short-lived. The Education for All (EFA) initiative, launched by all major UN organisations at the World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien in 1990, prioritised the expansion of school education. This became particularly apparent at the follow-up conference, the World Education Forum in Dakar in 2000, where lifelong learning all but disappeared from the agenda (Torres 2001). The notion of "basic education", which had been prominent in Jomtien a decade earlier, was effectively interpreted as universal primary education (Power 2015, p. 48).

Following the publication of the *Delors Report* in 1996, UNESCO greatly reduced its conceptual engagement with lifelong learning. While its specialised institute, the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning,¹ continued to promote lifelong learning policies, *Rethinking Education: Towards a Global Common Good* (UNESCO 2015b), the first substantial conceptual report on education published by UNESCO since the *Delors Report*, did not focus on lifelong learning (Elfert 2015b). However, now that the concept of lifelong learning features prominently in the SDGs, UNESCO is intensifying its conceptual, advocacy and policy-related work on lifelong learning (UIL 2018a, b). It is thus timely to explore the role of adult learning and education (ALE) in the SDGs, in particular from a human rights perspective.

¹ Established in 1952 in Hamburg, Germany as the UNESCO Institute for Education (UIE), it became the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) in 2006/2007. For a short history of the institute, see Elfert (2013).

Adult education in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals

What does the emergence of lifelong learning in SDG 4 mean for ALE? We will likely see international organisations, NGOs and civil society revitalising their engagement in activities to conceptualise and promote lifelong learning as a framework for educational reform in developing countries. However, since lifelong learning is a broad concept that encompasses education “from cradle to grave”, it remains to be seen whether this will include informal and non-formal education for adults. The monitoring of SDG 4 will take time and involves a myriad of bodies and mechanisms. SDG 4 on education will be reviewed for the first time in July 2019 by the High-Level Political Forum, a key mechanism for monitoring progress of SDG 4 (UN n.d.; UNESCO 2018a).

Opinions on the role of ALE within the SDG framework are merely speculative at this point, illustrated by the fact that two reports, both coming out of UNESCO, reflect divergent interpretations: The *3rd Global Report on Adult Learning and Education* (GRALE) emphasises that the SDGs place a stronger focus on adult learning and education than did the MDGs (UIL 2016, p. 15), while UNESCO’s *Global Education Monitoring Report 2016* observes that “the 10 targets [of SDG 4] fail to deal explicitly with adult education” (UNESCO 2016, p. 222; see also p. 236). In what follows, I will argue that we are unlikely to see a major shift in attention to ALE. I single out three aspects that have been highlighted in recent literature on education for development: (1) the focus on children and schools in international development initiatives and the renewed focus on secondary and higher education in SDG 4 and the global Education 2030 agenda; (2) the lack of funding for adult education; and (3) the lack of attention paid to marginalised groups.

The focus on children and schools in international development initiatives and the renewed focus on secondary and higher education in SDG 4 and the global Education 2030 agenda

Recent literature suggests that too little attention has been paid to non-formal and informal education relative to formal education in recent decades (Burnett 2017; Fredriksen 2017). Birger Fredriksen (2017) points to a “massive failure in basic skills development” in sub-Saharan Africa, where far greater attention must be given to training in the informal job sector, where most people work. However, most recent development initiatives and bodies have focused on formal education, in particular on schooling for children, such as the Global Partnership for Education,² the United Nations’ Global Education First initiative³ and *The Learning Generation* report prepared by the International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity (Education Commission 2016), which calls for greater attention to secondary and

² The Global Partnership for Education (GPE), which grew out of the World Bank’s Education for All Fast-Track initiative (FTI), is a multi-stakeholder partnership that raises funds for education and allocates them to low-income countries.

³ The United Nations’ Global Education First initiative (GEFI) was launched in 2012 as a five-year initiative “for the final push” (GEFI website; <http://www.globaleducationfirst.org/308.htm> [accessed 27 May 2019]) towards the achievement of the second MDG, universal primary education.

pre-primary education. The report refers to ALE only in terms of vocational training, leading Steven Klees to criticise the report's "complete disregard for adult education ... and the only cursory attention to education as a human right" (Klees 2017, p. 438). The consensus on the expansion of primary education already built up in the post-war years reached its peak during the 1980s and 1990s when the World Bank was influenced by studies showing that investment in primary education yielded the highest rates of return. In a recent report, George Psacharopoulos, who authored many of those World Bank studies, continues to designate increases in pre-school and primary education enrolment, as well as the improvement of school quality, as the "targets with the highest cost-benefit ratios" (Psacharopoulos 2014, p. I).

On the other hand, recent OECD studies indicate that rates of return are higher for tertiary than for primary education (cited in Bray and Varghese 2011, p. 27). Several commentators such as Karen Mundy and Antoni Verger suggest that the financial crisis of 2008 has shifted the focus of international investment towards secondary and tertiary education:

The financial crisis secured a trend that tilts Bank education lending towards large emerging economies, and away from basic education to secondary and tertiary levels of education, which are in particular demand among emerging market economies (Mundy and Verger 2015, p. 16).

Several studies have pointed to the renewed focus on higher education in SDG 4 (UNESCO-IIEP 2017; Owens 2017), which will not help to increase the profile of adult education. As the *Global Education Monitoring Report 2016* declared the SDG 4 secondary education goals to be "unattainable" (UNESCO 2016, p. 173, see also Klees 2017, p. 428), Fredriksen's (2016) warning that the excessive focus on secondary and higher education will detract from countries' ability to even meet primary education targets makes a lot of sense.

The neglect of adult literacy is reflected in the fact that the total number of adults with low literacy skills has dropped by just one per cent since 2000 (UNESCO 2014, p. 4). The lack of improvement in adult literacy rates, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, seems to contradict the perennial argument that universal schooling will ultimately produce a literate population: "Despite the impressive gains in access to primary education between 2000 and 2015, SSA [sub-Saharan Africa]'s adult literacy rate barely improved" (Fredriksen 2016). Massive dropout rates and stagnating literacy rates seem to vindicate those development educationists who point to a strong correlation between adult literacy and school success (ActionAid and Global Campaign for Education 2005, p. 8). However, as I have argued above, general interest in literacy has waned. Although some countries have invested in literacy campaigns in recent years, such as *Kha Ri Gude* in South Africa (McKay 2015) and *Brazil Alfabetizado* in Brazil (Hanemann 2015), and the African Union has included literacy campaigns among the strategic objectives of its *Continental Education Strategy for*

Africa 2016–2025 (AU 2016), when budgets are tight, countries tend to prioritise investments in children’s education (UIL 2017a, p. 19; Ireland 2016, pp. 5–6), and most of the education grants allocated by the Global Partnership for Education fund primary education (GPE 2017). In this regard it is important to note that the 2011 revised version of the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) removed the concept of “basic education” from ISCED levels 1 and 2; these are now referred to solely as “primary education” and “lower secondary education” (UIS 2013, p. 8). This clearly denotes a focus on schooling and reduces the pressure on governments to invest in adult literacy.

The lack of funding for adult education

The volume of international aid to education is decreasing (UNESCO 2017; UIL 2017b, p. 19). The financial crisis had a devastating effect on social and economic rights (Nolan 2016) and has greatly impacted donors’ investments in education for development. Against this background, the UNESCO *Global Education Monitoring Report 2016* states that “adult education remains a low priority in budgets” (UNESCO 2016, p. 239). This low spending on adult education is an indicator of its marginalisation. According to the 2017 CONFINTEA mid-term reports (UIL 2017a, b), the majority of countries spent less than 2 per cent of their national education budget on adult education. Although several countries reported some progress in political commitment to adult education (UIL 2017a, p. 11) and improved stakeholder coordination (ibid., p. 15), a slight increase in spending or the intention to increase spending, “in real terms ... given the severe depreciation of many African currencies, it is more likely to have been a decrease” (UIL 2017a, p. 18, b, p. 6).

The CONFINTEA mid-term review did not express much optimism about the funding situation in South Asia either: “The low level of spending on ALE in some countries in South Asia, with a substantial backlog of illiteracy and a large expanding youth population, is a matter of serious concern” (UIL 2017b, p. 19). A few African countries such as Senegal and Nigeria reported that they had received new funding from international bodies (ibid., p. 6). Others reported on cost-sharing schemes with civil society partners (ibid., p. 6), which point to the sporadic and ad-hoc nature of funding for adult education, which “in several countries ... continues to be seen as a temporary project and does not find a place in the regular national budget, leaving the sub-sector to depend essentially on extra-budgetary resources from NGOs and development partners” (UIL 2017b, p. 19). The report further cautions: “Increased dependence on funding through fees and private sources may eventually lead to decreased government financing” (ibid.).

The increased reference to the role of the private sector in filling funding gaps is alarming:

The results of the 3rd Conference on Financing for Development held in Addis Ababa, in July 2015, were not encouraging, concluding with the understanding that a large part of the funding will have to be sought in the private sector (Ireland 2016, p. 10).

UNESCO officials seem disenchanted with the prospects of private funding. In a 2015 article, Jordan Naidoo, currently Director of the Division for Education 2030 Support and Coordination at UNESCO, stated that “international public finance plays an important role in complementing the efforts of countries to mobilize public resources domestically” (Naidoo 2015). In a later article, Naidoo seemed to have lost much of his optimism. Referring to the funding gap for education in developing countries, he wrote: “The role of the private sector, while increasingly in the spotlight, is not clear, both in terms of increased funding but also its impact on the right to education” (Naidoo 2017). Given the massive shift in the political economy towards privatisation of education (Verger et al. 2016) and the way the discourse of lifelong learning has been used to advance a market-oriented agenda of employability (Martin 2003; Elfert 2018, chapter 7), there is a real risk that we will see a privatisation of adult education similar to the current development in relation to schooling (Steiner-Khamsi and Draxler 2018).

The lack of attention paid to marginalised groups

Although the literacy goal of the previous EFA framework⁴ has not been achieved, UNESCO’s old dream of universal literacy has been effectively buried in the formulation of SDG target 4.6 that “a substantial proportion of adults ... achieve literacy and numeracy” (Hanemann 2016; Torres 2017). Looking at data from the EFA period, a 2009 background study carried out by UNESCO on national EFA reports targeting marginalised populations revealed a strong focus on children in national education plans. In relation to EFA Goal 3, to “Promote learning and life skills for young people and adults”, the study found that only 30 per cent of the reports mention marginalised groups in relation to secondary education (UNESCO-IIEP 2009, p. 16). Most of the countries focused on achieving gender parity. Very few plans – 5 out of 44 – included specific targets for marginalised groups. Four of the plans that included targets focused on girls, and in one case, on poor and vulnerable youth (*ibid.*, p. 17). The report further stated that “few countries propose specific measurable targets for disadvantaged groups” (*ibid.*, p. 36).

Another important finding pointed out by the UNESCO-IIEP study is that “very few plans ... contain an analysis of the situation of marginalized or disadvantaged groups” (UNESCO-IIEP 2009, p. 36). As a consequence, targets and strategies remain at a general level (*ibid.*, p. 37). The study further suggests that “the lack of specific targets may also reflect an unwillingness to commit to specific promises. Committing to strategies is probably easier than committing to targets” (*ibid.*, p. 37). The disconnect between targets and strategies and the lack of analysis found in the reports indicate that countries currently fail to pay close attention to the educational needs of disadvantaged groups.

⁴ The EFA literacy goal was to achieve “a 50 per cent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults” (UNESCO 2015c, p. 137).

Other data confirm these findings. The *3rd Global Report on Adult Learning and Education* reported that

the most marginalized, disadvantaged and poorest people are persistently excluded from ALE activities (UIL 2016, p. 14).

The CONFINTEA mid-term report for sub-Saharan Africa points out that neither a human rights perspective on ALE nor a focus on marginalised groups are “particularly prominent” (UIL 2017a, p. 10) in the country responses: “Apart from the belief that literacy provision to adults should be limited to ‘functional literacy’, formal recognition and equivalency to conventional schooling are the strongest themes” (ibid.). The report further states that the “socially excluded, the disabled, minorities, migrants, refugees and the long-term unemployed” were “relatively neglected” (ibid., p. 11). Against the background of the dramatic struggles of migrants, refugees, indigenous peoples, racialised groups and people living in poverty, and considering the crucial role adult education could play in tackling these challenges, the lack of attention paid to the plight of the most vulnerable, as revealed by these reports, is disturbing but not surprising, given the historical marginalisation of adult education in education for development. As I have shown above, adult education has been overshadowed by formal school education, and where it has been supported, this was mainly as a strategy for promoting economic growth.

Concluding remarks: the lack of a transformative vision

In this section I come back to my initial question: In the context of the SDGs, will the human rights-based approach to adult education see a revival after a long period of investment in primary education? I believe there is reason for scepticism, given the lack of a political and transformative vision in the SDGs, despite the title of the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, “Transforming our world” (UN 2015). The SDGs are embedded in an overall climate that depoliticises social problems. As Valeria Esquivel observed, “Agenda 2030 aims at ‘transforming our world’, but intends to get there without substantially opposing the powers that be. Power relations are the big elephant in the room of Agenda 2030” (Esquivel 2016, p. 12).

Scholars looking at EFA had already observed a tendency in international development frameworks and activities to propose strategies and elaborate accountability mechanisms as solutions for identified problems without discussing the underlying reasons for these problems. Karen Mundy suggested that EFA stood for “a global consensus that actively avoids an understanding of development focused on global structural inequalities” (Mundy 2007, p. 25). In his analysis of the discourse of the *Dakar Framework for Action* (WEF 2000), the outcome document of the World Education Forum in Dakar in 2000 and the precursor of the *Incheon Declaration* (WEF 2015), Laurence Tamatea (2005) revealed the “matrix-like effects” of the *Dakar Framework for Action*. He argued that, while employing a humanistic rhetoric, the *Framework* put forward common-sense discourse, such as the imperatives of “quality,” “transparency” and “accountability” that contribute to the “McDonald’s-like homogenizing of global education” (Tamatea 2005, p. 313) and carry forward

“colonialist and imperial legacies” (ibid., p. 329). According to Klees, “the SDGs will lock in the global development agenda for the next fifteen years around a failing economic model that requires urgent and deep structural changes” (Klees 2017, p. 436, citing Hickel 2015).

In a similar vein, several scholars and civil society representatives have criticised the SDGs for buttressing the status quo (Smith 2018), adhering to a neoliberal framework (Struckmann 2018), and failing to address “structural power relations” (Esquivel 2016). Jeffrey Smith (2018) points to the glaring absence of the word “democracy” in the 17 SDGs. Lynette Shultz (2015, p. 101) had already observed the disappearance of references to democracy in UNESCO documents a few years back. In this vein, Timothy Ireland recently pointed out that

the underlying logic of both the Education 2030 Framework and Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is Eurocentric and Western liberal and neoliberal. These agendas, although promising to reduce world poverty, will do little to question or transform the existing relations of power and structures of oppression which contribute to unequal opportunities for development (Ireland 2018, p. 24).

Given the historical discreditation of adult education as too political, the depoliticisation of social problems will likely not play out in favour of the human rights-based approach to ALE. Informal and non-formal learning are associated with social movements, grassroots community-organising and collective activity that have been largely dismissed in favour of an approach in which learning is constructed as an individual and personal issue. The SDGs fail to address the underlying structural issues such as poverty reduction that need to be tackled in order to achieve the goals. As Gillian MacNaughton (2018) has argued in relation to SDG 10, although the goal addresses economic inequalities, it focuses on the bottom 40 per cent instead of the gap between the bottom 40 per cent and the top 10 per cent or 1 per cent.

Without a transformative vision, the reference to human rights in the SDGs is little more than a token to make it more acceptable to civil society. While the rhetoric of the global education agendas invokes the discourse of human rights, citizenship and social inclusion, “policies often prioritize economic objectives, placing more emphasis on formal ALE and labour market outcomes than on non-formal ALE, which tends to have less tangible community outcomes” (UIL 2016, p. 14). Just like the *Dakar Framework*, the new international education targets and strategies stay within the “matrix”; they are meant to reproduce society as it is rather than present a vision that transcends it.

Civil society has traditionally tended to advocate a human rights approach to ALE, but it is not clear what the influence of civil society is on the policy direction of ALE. In Latin America, for example, the popular education movement differs profoundly from what most national governments propose as policy for adult education (personal communication with Timothy Ireland, 6 February 2018). Although the consultation process leading up to the SDGs has involved civil society organisations and was more transparent and inclusive than the MDG process (Fukuda-Parr and McNeill 2019), Bhumika Muchhala, Ranja Sengupta and Chee Yoke Ling have criticised last-minute changes to the text “behind closed doors” (Muchhala et al.

2015, para 7) in meetings attended only by Member States' representatives. These "back-room discussions were a stark contrast to the integrity of the process in which the SDGs were formulated" (ibid., para 10).

Another question is how informal and non-formal learning can be monitored and measured. As the *Global Education Monitoring Report* 2019 observes, "lifelong learning opportunities represent half of the SDG 4 formulation but receive only a fraction of global attention" (UNESCO 2018b, p. 266). Aaron Benavot and Ashley Stepanek Lockhart point to the lack of available data for participation in non-formal education in developing countries (Benavot and Stepanek Lockhart 2016, p. 5). They further maintain that the "skills" agenda might make it difficult to monitor progress in adult education, as the lack of a common definition of "relevant skills" for some of the targets in SDG 4 could undermine their monitoring (ibid., pp. 4–5; see also King 2017, p. 807). Furthermore, there is considerable disparity between the ambitious goals and the narrow indicators used to measure them (Unterhalter 2019; see also King 2017). An example in relation to adult education is SDG target 4.4, which reads: "By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship". The respective indicator 4.4.1 only refers to the "proportion of youth and adults with information and communications technology (ICT) skills, by type of skill", clearly narrowing "relevant skills" to technological skills.

When asked why lifelong learning was included in SDG 4, a former UNESCO staff member responded, because "it doesn't cost anything" and "it doesn't hurt anyone" (personal communication). In a recent UNESCO paper, another former UNESCO staffer, Carlos Vargas, referring to Colin Griffin (2000), argued along the same lines: "Lifelong learning apparently advantages everyone and disadvantages no-one" (Vargas 2017, p. 5). At the time of EFA, "the Third World countries regarded lifelong education as a luxury of the Developed World" (Rubenson 2006, p. 71). Today the discourse of lifelong learning is globally accepted and has become "the preferred formula for preparing individuals and societies for a life of uncertainty and insecurity, unstable jobs and changing work profiles and locations" (Vargas 2017, p. 6; see also Elfert 2018, chapter 7). The citizenship dimension of adult education in the post-World War II years, with its emphasis on emancipation, solidarity and democracy, has largely disappeared. At the same time, the role of UNESCO in the system of global governance has diminished. UNESCO was created as the lead agency of the UN system for education, but since the 1960s it has lost much of its influence to other international organisations, such as the World Bank (Elfert 2017). Its humanistic approach lost out to the human capital approach, which is more congruent with a market-driven economic system. As Timothy Ireland has shown, there is no evidence that any progress has been achieved in the advancement of a human rights-driven agenda for adult education between CONFINTEA V in 1997 and CONFINTEA VI in 2009 (Ireland 2016).

The historical analysis I have offered in this article provides a clearer picture of the role and position of ALE, especially from a human rights perspective, within the development education agenda. Although the SDGs contain clear opportunities for lifelong learning, there is little to indicate that the human rights-oriented tradition

of adult education with its focus on democratic agency and collective action will re-emerge within the confines of the “matrix”. As Klees rightly states, referring to the late UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, Katarina Tomasevski, “if education were truly a human right, we would not be waiting until 2030 or 2040 to ensure it” (Klees 2017, p. 438, referring to Tomasevski 2003). I would like to add, if education were truly a human right, it would include all people, especially the poorest and most marginalised. The right to education means *education for all*.

However, given the enormity of global problems facing the international community, including climate change and the growing precarity of employment, there is hope that the re-emergence of lifelong learning may lead to educational reforms that will improve people’s lives. There is hope that policymakers will develop greater awareness of the need to think outside of the “matrix” in order to effectively tackle global problems. The human rights-based approach to adult education certainly would have much to contribute to “transforming our world”.

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